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ABSTRACT

This monograph examines issues related specifically to male gender roles; males' self-esteem; and males' participation in the learning environment, nontraditional work, and vocational education. The social and emotional difficulties experienced by males because of society's limited definition of masculinity and strict thinking regarding the male gender role are discussed. Examined next are implications of the historically strong link between work and conceptions of masculinity in the United States. The importance of the issues of male self-esteem, self-concept, and sense of masculinity in vocational education is analyzed in a discussion that includes the findings of a study of the myths and stereotypes held by many high school-age males about nontraditional vocational careers. Possible ways of expanding options for males in vocational education are explored, and eight steps to achieving equity for males in vocational education are listed. Concluding the monograph is a section of statements that illustrate many of the problems encountered by men because of traditional expectations of the male's role in society. Contains 17 references. (MV)

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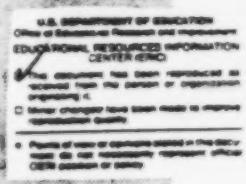
MONOGRAPH

MALE ISSUES IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION



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INTRODUCTION

The way our society defines masculinity affects males from the time their gender is identified until the time an epitaph appears at their grave. Understanding the quest for sex equity in vocational education and how it relates to males and masculinity is in great part dependent upon comprehending the link between sex and gender roles. Sex is ascribed at birth, whereas gender roles are discovered through socialization. Gender roles, and the acceptable behaviors and traits associated with those roles, are learned—and they are limiting to both sexes.

The focus in vocational equity has traditionally been on expanding options for females who lack access to challenging classes such as math and science and, later in life, to high-wage occupations necessary to support their families. In fact, girls lack an understanding of the very fact that they will have to support their families later in life (Greene and Peters, 1987). There is much work to do at all levels in the vocational preparation of females to combat the feminization of poverty so currently an issue in federal government (U.S. Department of Labor, 1993).

However, males suffer from discrimination also. It may not be reflected by comparing their paychecks to women's, but it is reflected in their social interactions, parenting skills, interest in nontraditional jobs (these usually include a high level of nurturing or interpersonal skills), and the ever-present pressure to succeed at being "a man" at all costs (Meth and Pasick, 1990). Usually being "a man" is defined by both sexes in our society as involving high earnings and sexual and physical prowess, and it encompasses bravery, superiority, and dominance—typically "masculine" characteristics.

Most males are not taught the stereotypic "feminine" characteristics, such as affective or nurturing skills (Nash, 1991). Girls tend to learn early in life to relate emotional affect and concern for others; however, these skills are not typically taught to males, nor are they traits that are generally valued in males in our society. One can draw a correlation between females' lack of access to high-wage jobs and lack of assertiveness skills and males' lack of access to nontraditional jobs and lack of affective skills (Flood, 1991). Perhaps even more important is that what males are taught—the myths and stereotypes of masculinity—can have profound negative consequences on themselves, their education, their work, and their relationships (Meth, 1990).

The implications of stereotypic gender-role definitions based on sex and how they lead to conceptions of masculinity by males and females in the vocational education arena are somewhat unique. Issues related to male gender roles, males' self-esteem, and males' participation in the learning environment, in nontraditional work, and in vocational education will be the focus of this monograph.

MASCULINITY AND THE MALE GENDER ROLE

One's definition of masculinity and what it means to be male is learned through interactions with others. Initially, it is learned through interactions with one's parents and peers and, later in life, through one's associations with significant others. Role-modeling occurs and the expectations of others are interpreted and acted upon in a manner befitting a person of the male gender. Once the male gender role is learned, it is thus reflected in interactions with others. The way males relate to other males, females, and themselves is therefore defined in a fairly limited way. Establishing harmonious interactions in these relationships facilitates productive participation in life's endeavors. However, society's limited definition of masculinity excludes the affective, interpersonal realm that readily leads to harmonious interactions with others.

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Tucker (1992) states—

> Gentlemen, we are under scrutiny—if not outright attack. In case you haven't been keeping up, here's the short version: Women don't much like us anymore. They say we force them to live in fear. They say we're raised to be angry tyrants, a role we relish. They say all we think about is sex. They say we can't say what we feel, can't relate to our children, can't understand a word women say.

Tucker goes on to discuss research conducted with "100 regular guys," an overwhelming number of whom described themselves as miserable. He states that the main problems men have are that they don't understand themselves; they don't have many close male friends; and they feel isolated from one another, their wives or lovers, and their children. Tucker quotes psychologist Marvin Allen from a book he is currently working on *Rediscovering the Heart of the American Male:*

> Men have developed the tools for success, but not the tools for living. Men learned to play hurt and not complain in sports, and they learn to work and live hurt. Because they're isolated from one another, they don't realize how many other men are hurting. Once we get together and share experiences, we'll learn. But that won't be easy, because most of us men live largely unexamined lives.

One problem is that many men consider their manhood tied to their successes. Losing a job, not being able to support the family, suffering a bout of impotence, or even backing away from a physical confrontation are experienced not as temporary setbacks but as evidence that they are "not men." The answer? Men need to make only a slight, but profound, alteration in their philosophy. They need to learn to experience their own feelings deeply and to express them (Tucker, 1992).

MASCULINITY DEFINED THROUGH WORK

Historically there has been a strong link between work and conceptions of masculinity in America. Males' sense of worth has been intimately tied to the type of work performed and the status ascribed to that work. For example, a man who works as a doctor or lawyer gains self-worth through his profession; he gains respect from others merely by his choice of work. It is the link between conceptions of masculinity and conceptions of work that greatly determines males' views of their own and others' masculinity. It is much more acceptable and more "masculine" in our society for a male to be a welder or an engineer than it is for a male to be a nurse or a dental technician. A male's sense of self-worth often comes into question if he chooses to be a nurse. If a male chooses a nontraditional career, some other strongly masculine characteristics, such as a deep voice or an assertive stance, are needed to portray his masculinity, defend himself against societal pressures, and offset his "feminine" career choice. For most males, it is simply easier to avoid choosing a "feminine" career in the first place.

Pasick (1990) writes of *disadvantaged males* when he states that "males are raised to work." Others write of *male privilege*—the invisible package of unearned assets (those obtained simply because one is born male) that males in our society can count on cashing in each day and to which many remain oblivious. Social researcher Peggy McIntosh (1988) notes that male privilege is a phenomenon with a life of its own (similar to white privilege). McIntosh contends that only rarely will a man go beyond acknowledging that women are disadvantaged to acknowledging that men have an unearned advantage in society. Research supports this advantage through studies that confirm males are listened to more frequently than females, are paid more money than females for comparable work, and are promoted to higher positions in companies than females when both make equal contributions (Sadker, Sadker, and Kaser, 1982; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Research, 1991; U.S. Department of Labor, Women's Bureau, 1991).

However, along with this *privilege* comes a heavy toll. Because males are taught to be competitive, autonomous, and independent, they learn to value success in this arena at an early age, and to achieve this they must be strong, persistent, and self-reliant (Pasick, 1990). In the late 1980s, men started recognizing that these values were not compatible with family life. The same strategies that are rewarded at work usually fail miserably at home and around friends. Men search at home for a structure they are accustomed to, but because children are not static in their development, no clear, consistent set of rules is possible. Cooperation is the key to success at home, and with the introduction of diverse workers into the workplace, it is becoming more and more the key to success at work. Men who try to manage **relationships** at home and at work using the techniques they once found effective at work—such as logic, rationality, following rules, and finding "the answer"—will not succeed. Their failures cause them stress and they feel even less "masculine" (Pasick, 1990).

Males are taught formally and informally that they must assume a lofty status in American society. They are the builders, the fixers, the strong providers in our society. Although this makes men good, dedicated workers, it places them in a position of authority that has negative consequences on themselves and their relationships with others. The male identity has more to do with separation than with relations (Smithson, 1990). Logically, therefore, males need early training to discover their feelings and to explore ways to relate and connect with others—not just through their work and their accomplishments, but through an understanding of who they really are and what they want out of life. Their choice of career should be based not on their gender, but on what they like to do and what they are good at doing. In the workplace, in the family, and in educational settings, males who understand themselves will be better able to relate to others.

MALE SELF-ESTEEM, MASCULINITY, AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

Male self-esteem, self-concept, and sense of masculinity are important issues in vocational education. Male socialization issues must be recognized and examined in order to understand males in the vocational education system. For example, seldomly

discussed is the stigma attached to the self-esteem and self-concept of males in vocational education. After all, striving to be successful is a highly masculine trait in American society. For many in society success is associated with a college education. The college-bound male will get part of his credentials for masculinity from his affiliation with a college, whereas a male's masculinity in the vocational education system may remain suspect for a period of time.

Because of this, it is entirely possible that males in the vocational education system may increase their efforts to exhibit their masculinity. For instance, the choice of a perceived highly masculine career, such as auto mechanics or carpentry, may reflect a young man's desire to appear masculine more than it reflects a career choice based on interests and values. Often, a male's desire to appear masculine translates into the rejection of anything appearing feminine, and a nontraditional career, such as secretary or child-care worker, would not be perceived as serving to validate his masculinity. It is only natural to exhibit behaviors that enhance self-esteem and support self-definition of masculinity and self-worth. However, it is unfortunate that society's definition of masculinity is so narrowly defined.

Beliefs held by many tenth- to twelfth-grade males about nontraditional vocational careers seem to support a close relationship between self-esteem, self-concept, and masculinity. The following myths and stereotypes were stated:

1. "Males are not suited to nontraditional work. They don't have the compassion or patience to work in nursing, child care, occupations that require nurturing, caring personalities."
2. "The wages aren't high enough for males to work in nontraditional jobs. Men have to be the primary earners in their families!"
3. "There is something wrong with males who choose nontraditional jobs. These types of occupations threaten men's masculinity. All male nurses and hairdressers are gay."
4. "Nontraditional jobs are dead-end jobs. Why would a male want a job where there's no opportunity for advancement?" (Thompson, 1993)

Obviously, these statements imply that gender limits career choices—career decisions are made based on sex-role stereotypes. Male self-concept is very much integrated with perceptions about masculinity. Males learn to feel good about themselves when they perceive that others think of them as highly masculine. Unfortunately, when males avoid anything "feminine" and devalue warmth, nurturance, caring, flexibility, and other traits associated with femininity, they are thought to be highly masculine. Upon closer examination, however, these are the very aspects that males need to learn to integrate into their personalities to become fully functioning.

Carried even further, some believe that in males' quest to be masculine the avoidance of anything feminine can lead to an absolute dislike for anything feminine in their nature (Kaufman, 1992). Many males learn to be hostile toward any form of femininity they find in themselves (Meth, 1990). Males exhibit this hostility by calling each other names, such as "sissy" or "fag," and by frowning on domestic tasks, such as cooking. When these feelings bleed over into relationships with others, they can lead to sexist attitudes and behaviors in the workplace, school, or home. Behavioral manifestations that validate masculinity can include sexual harassment, homophobia (hatred of homosexuals), misogyny (hatred of women), and male dominance (Meth, 1990).

EXPANDING OPTIONS FOR MALES IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

According to American Vocational Association Executive Director Charles H. Buzzell, there are millions of students enrolled in approximately 26,000 vocational schools and institutions nationwide that prepare students for 400 occupational areas (Buzzell, 1993). There is little reason to think that the vocational education system has been developed and maintained without the pervasive characteristics of gender-role stereotyping. On the contrary, socialized roles for males and females are intricate characteristics of most of this society's basic institutions, vocational education being only one of them.

According to these socialized roles, it is to men's advantage to enter training that maximizes their likelihood of entering masculine vocations. Therefore, it is more likely that males will enroll in vocational classes that prepare them for the more-valued masculine vocations, leaving the more-feminine and less-valued vocational training for females. Negrete (1991) stated that "abandoning their traditional views of females may be the most difficult challenge for many males because it entails letting go of learned stereotypes and prejudices, not to mention the difficulty of dealing with cultural values that have long been entrenched since the early years of life."

Buzzell (1993) believes that federal investment in the nation's vocational-technical education system will result in returns that will exceed the resources committed. However, the investment must be grounded in a philosophy that respects both feminine and masculine characteristics. This can only be achieved in educational environments if individual differences are valued and not ranked hierarchically by gender (or race). After all, traits ordinarily associated with femininity and females—such as passivity, sensitivity, affection, mildness, warmth, nurturance, and intuitiveness—are appropriate for males to possess and employ when interacting with others—both males and females. The use of these traits could greatly benefit males when interacting socially with each other since they usually learn to suppress the "feminine" aspects of themselves or at least to devalue and disguise them in social encounters with others.

In the learning environment, both the teacher and the student gain immeasurably from social interaction characterized by caring, warmth, sensitivity, nurturance, and mentoring—traits ordinarily associated with femininity. It is crucial for **both** male and female students and teachers in vocational education environments to have at their disposal the full range of positive feminine and masculine traits that support the learning process. Specifically, warmth, nurturance, mildness, and curiosity—ordinarily associated with femininity—can be appropriately integrated with the decisiveness, rigor, assertiveness, and logical thought typically associated with masculinity. This development would undermine sexism and gender-role stereotyping, while promoting sex-role equality and sex-fair education.

STEPS TO ACHIEVING EQUITY FOR MALES IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

A survey of male vocational education administrators and teachers revealed much of what has been stated in this monograph and led to the development of the following list of steps to be accomplished in this area. A particular *thank you* to Ed Little, Principal at Gaiser Middle School in Vancouver, Washington, and former chair of the task force on men's issues of the National Coalition for Sex Equity in Education (NCSSE); and to Larry Farley, Home Economics Instructor at Southeast Career Center in Columbus, Ohio, for their valuable input.

1. Make an extra effort to promote males into nontraditional vocational classes by exposing students to successful, nontraditional, male role models, e.g., male food service workers, child-care workers, nurses.
2. Incorporate nonsexist activities that teach cooperation and respect into all classes, e.g., team projects, group assignments.
3. Do not accept name-calling or any form of sexual harassment or violence at school.
4. Build self-confidence in young people by reinforcing any accomplishments of which one can be proud.
5. Conduct inservice workshops for educators and administrators so they can learn to model respect toward all individuals and to be sensitive to the effects of gender-role stereotyping.
6. Provide information to parents and the community regarding the benefits and rewards of nontraditional work for males.
7. Hire nontraditional teachers to serve as role models and break down stereotypes about nontraditional work for males.
8. Include pictures of males engaged in nontraditional work roles in posters and materials.

FOR EVERY WOMAN . . . THERE IS A MAN . . .

For every woman who is tired of acting weak when she feels she is strong, there is a man who is tired of appearing strong when he feels vulnerable.

For every woman who is tired of being called an "emotional female," there is a man who is denied the right to weep and be gentle.

For every woman who feels tied down by her children, there is a man who is denied the pleasures of shared parenthood.

For every woman who has not learned the intricacies of the automobile, there is a man who has not learned the satisfaction of cooking.

For every woman who is denied meaningful employment or equal pay, there is a man who must bear full financial responsibility for another human being.

For every woman who takes a step toward her own liberation, there is a man who finds the way to freedom has been made a little easier.

(Source: Unknown)

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Videotapes and other classroom resources on men's issues are available for loan by contacting your state-sponsored Sex Equity Resource Library at the Center on Education and Training for Employment, 1900 Kenny Road, Columbus, Ohio 43210-1090; (614) 292-4353 or (800) 848-4815; Steve Chambers, Librarian.